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Atari Online News, Etc.
A-ONE Online Magazine
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~ Mac OS X Leopard Out! ~ People Are Talking! ~ 3rd Space Game Vest!
~ Top Holiday Wishlists! ~ UK Spies Seek Gamers! ~ New, Cheaper PS3!
~ Comcast Blocks Traffic ~ New MP3 Spam Trick! ~ Orange Box Value!

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~ Porn Spammers Get Jail ~

-* Internet To Go To Outer Space *-
-* Internet Tax Block Passes In House! *-
-* Four More States Seek Microsoft Oversight! *-

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->From the Editor's Keyboard
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"Saying it like it is!"

Y'know something, there just aren't enough hours in the day to get all of the things done that you need to do! This has just been another one of those weeks, I guess. My wife and I have been spending a good amount of time helping her mother sort through and take care of her father's things. I used to consider myself an out-of-control packrat until I started seeing what her father had everywhere! It's amazing how much stuff was laying around that was still in original packaging and never touched! Needless to say, some things managed to find their way here. And other things that we'll have to sort, catalog, and try to sell.

It's been a very strange week for weather around here also. Cold mornings, and then the days have warmed up to unseasonable temperatures. Ordinarily, we'd call this spell Indian Summer, but we haven't had a hard frost yet. Even today, the temperatures were warm, and we even got downright humid! I don't mind it being warm, but I hope that we manage to see a relatively seasonal October. Maybe, maybe not...

There have been a number of "headlines" lately that I was hoping to talk about the past few weeks. Joe has broached the subject in the past, and I wanted to go into it more: stupid people. But, time being of the essence, I can't dive into them. But let's just mention a few beauts from recent weeks, of the celebrity variety. O.J. Simpson. Britney Spears, again and again - so much for her wanting to be a good parent. Ellen Degeneres and her crocodile tears - the puppy and the family that wanted it are the real losers here, but so is Degeneres for being such an ass. George Steinbrenner and his Yankees - money just doesn't buy what it used to years ago. And I'm sure that there are more that I can't think of at the moment! I noticed (I "cheated" and read a bit of Joe's column this week!) that Joe elaborated on one of my "stupid people of the month" stories, so I won't fret about not going into more detail (read: ranting).

So, while we sweat it out here in the Northeast, among the rain showers and dense fog banks, I'll let you continue with this week's issue!

Until next time...

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PEOPLE ARE TALKING

compiled by Joe Mirando
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Hidi ho friends and neighbors. It LOOKS like there're enough messages in on the UseNet for a decent column, so we're going to give it a try. Besides, there are one or two things I want to talk about this week.

First of all, the weather here in the northeast. Dana has probably mentioned it already, but the weather has been unseasonably warm there for the past month or more. Today, for instance, the temperature is in the low 70's, and the humidity is right up around 80%. Needless to say, it's kind of sticky and uncomfortable. While days like this aren't uncommon here in the northeast, a string of at least several weeks IS.

Is it tied to global warming? I don't know. I'm not even going to speculate. Right now, it's annoying enough that it's happening. I'll leave it to those who know better (or at least think they do) to figure out why. But I think it's safe to say that we are seeing changing weather patterns, anyway. Heck, that might even have to do with the current 'solar minimum', the low point in the 11 year solar activity cycle. Whatever it is... I hate it.

Okay, the other thing... have you heard about this pet adoption thing with Ellen Degeneres? It seems that she adopted or 'rescued' a puppy, had it spayed or neutered, and hired a trainer to try to get the dog to get along with her cats.

Well, long story short (or, actually, long story slightly less long), the cats and dog didn't get along, so Degeneres gave the dog to her hair stylist and her two young daughters. The dog loved the little girls, and the little girls loved the dog. All's well that ends well, right?

Wrong.

It seems that Ellen's life partner didn't read the contract that she'd signed when adopting the dog. The contract says that if you end up not wanting to or not being able to keep the dog, that you will return it to the rescue shelter.

When the rescue organization called the Degeneres home to see how the pup was doing, they innocently told the caller that it was healthy and happy in a different home.

According to the account, the person on the other end of the phone... well, had a hissy, stating that they were in breach of their contract, and that unless the dog was returned to the rescue org by a particular time, they were going to call the police and retrieve the dog themselves... which is what they did.

Okay, now we've dropped a level or two on the 'civility scale', but things can still be salvaged, right?

Well, you'd be right if that was the end of the story. But it ain't. It seems that Degeneres spilled her guts on her afternoon television show, because the little girls were heartbroken at the loss of their new pet.

I've seen clips of the show, and it wasn't pretty. She was blubbering

all over the place. I'm not saying that it wasn't genuine. I believe that it was. It's just that it served to drop us to the next-lowest level on the civility scale.

It seems that the rescue organization has a rule against placing a dog less than four months old with families with children younger than 14. The young girls in question were 10 and 12, if I remember correctly. So now, the family can't even apply to the rescue org to adopt the puppy.

Okay, so now everyone feels bad. And if it hadn't been for the fact that Ellen Degeneres has a television show, it would have ended at that. But since the broadcast of the show (it was recorded the previous day), and since news services picked up the story, the entire country heard about it. That's what fueled the power-dive to the bottom rung of the civility scale.

Individuals, mostly well-meaning pet lovers, called, wrote and emailed the rescue organization en masse. Most, I'm sure were simply people saying, "aw, c'mon... let the little girls have the puppy", but there were others threatening bodily harm and property damage.

To quote the comedian Kevin Meaney, "That's not right".

It seems to me that what we have here is a failure to communicate. Had Degeneres and/or her girlfriend Porche read the contract instead of simply assuming that it said "you can do whatever you want", then the whole thing would have been avoided, and the civility scale would have stayed at Defcon 5. Had they, once they realized that the dog wasn't working out, called the rescue organization and recommended the hair dresser's family, the rescue org may have made an exception, keeping the civility scale at Defcon 4.

Had the person from the rescue organization been a little more sympathetic and offered to work something out with Degeneres and friends, the civility scale wouldn't have dropped to Defcon 3.

Once the situation became public (which I'm not necessarily against), we went to Defcon 2, and with the public getting involved, we found ourselves at Defcon 1.

Now, I'm a big fan of rescue organizations and pet adoption. Our Lab/Border Collie mix was a rescue. She's a wonderful critter, and is now fully integrated into our family. I can't imagine buying a dog from a puppy mill when there are so many perfectly good critters sitting in cages waiting to be euthanized. I'm not going to breed her, I'm not going to 'show' her. So what do I need with all that fancy stuff and high price?

Oh, by the way, I DID read the contract before I signed it, and knowing what the "do's and don't's" were was worth taking the time to read it.

There. To quote Forrest Gump, that's all I have to say about that. Now let's get to the news, hints, tips and info from the UseNet.

From the comp.sys.atari.st NewsGroup
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Jean-Luc Ceccoli asks about accessing his midi files with long names:

"As Cubase can neither run under MagiC! nor MiNT, and as I need to handle loads of midifiles with loooooong names, I wonder if there is a way to do this. Any idea?"

Uwe Seimet, author of HD Driver, tells Jean-Luc:

"There is no alternative to MagiC or MiNT for support of long filenames. Organizing files in nested folders is probably the best way in your case to handle a huge number of files."

Jean-Luc tells Uwe:

"That's the way they (over 9 000!) already are sorted. But the problem is, that they have long names, and the only way I have to know which is what under TOS is to rename each one under MagiC! so the name is more, say, obvious. Can you imagine renaming over 9000 files under MagiC!? Moreover, when loading one of these with Cubase, and saving it again, it will be converted in 8+3... so, again, problems... That's why I hoped there could be a solution to make LFNS readable under plain TOS. Assumed that, as Martin did point it out, Cubase should be able to handle them. Not that obvious..."

Uwe replies:

"I can imagine doing this under MiNT. This is a typical task for scripting, a small perl script preferably."

Martin Byttebier adds:

"As far as I know, Cubase does work under N_AES/MiNT but I would be surprised if Cubase would understand LFNS."

Last week, someone posted about the Atari 2600:

"The Atari 2600, known in the 70s as the Atari VCS ~ Video Computer System, is 30 years as of October 2007. its birthday was actually at the start of this month, but I didn't realize it until just now. It's incredible knowing that the videogame console industry is over 30 years old."

Edward Baiz replies:

"Yes it is great, but the really incredible thing is that I paid over \$300 for the system. That was a really hefty price for back then. But, it really was worth it. I still have mine and it works."

'Old Knick' adds:

"I remember I paid \$189 at Toys R Us but it had been out for awhile and the year was 1978."

'Turbo Torch' replies:

"First I heard of a 2600 was in a Tepe's catalog which listed it at \$299. I think the catalog was out before the system was officially released so I don't know for sure if it actually sold for that price at the very beginning. The regular old selling price for a long time was \$199 and that was the target price I was saving up for. By the time I hit \$150, Toys R Us put it on sale for \$150...I was very happy to get it early."

'TPr' chimes in and says:

"Damn, you guys had it hard, It was only \$49.95 when i got my first one!"

Jo Even Skarenstein asks about the current status of MagiC:

"It looks like the latest version of MagiC is 6.20, which is six years old by now. Does anybody have any news, heard any rumours or something? Is MagiC abandoned...?"

There is no such thing as a bug free piece of software, and for 100 euros I expect at least some bugfixes. Also, there's a lot of new stuff being added to XaAES and MyAES now, if these are not added to MagiC in the future there is no point in developing software for it."

Fidel-Sebastian Hunrichse-Lara tells Jo Even:

"For a normal MagiC-user it's not interesting if a lot of new stuff is being added to XaAES or MyAES but rather if it runs under MagiC! Whatever happens with XaAES or MyAES doesn't concern me..."

Jo Even replies:

"The point is that stuff written to take advantage of the new features in XaAES/MyAES won't work on MagiC. In that sense developments in XaAES and MyAES will affect MagiC-users in the future. Currently there's only minor things that differs MagiC and XaAES (XaAES supports nearly everything in MagiC now, and adds some new features as well), but that will add up in the future."

Guillaume Tello adds his thoughts:

"...With the MagiC sources, some improvements made to XaAES and MyAES could be ported to MagiC, just for compatibility."

Uwe Seimet adds this:

"Considering that the MagiC sources are in assembler and the MiNT sources are in C you would have to rewrite everything in assembler. I think that when Andreas Kromke says that understanding MagiC's assembler code is very difficult (or something similar) he is serious."

One should not assume that simply by releasing the sources of such a project others will be able to maintain these sources. One must at

least have an excellent knowledge of the problem domain. In the case of MagiC one would have to have an excellent knowledge of assembler programming, of operating systems in general and of the details in the specifications released for TOS, the AES, VDI etc. My guess is that most of those still writing software for the Atari do not even have a complete set of valid specifications."

Jo Even thinks aloud:

"Ozk would be the ideal person to do this, but he's not interested in MagiC at all."

Didier MØquignon offers:

"I can do this task, 68K assembler is not a problem for me. I remember to post here an answer about a MagiC thread of Andreas (some years old). My last task was to rewrite the the main part of the VDI in 68K/Coldfire assembler (who use fVDI C routine and Radeon C driver). And I think I have also build the biggest program in assembler for Atari...Aniplayer."

Uwe asks Didier:

"Is it bigger than the text program TempusWord, which immediately comes to my mind when thinking about big programs written in assembler?"

Do you think somebody else would be able to maintain your assembler sources, fix bugs and add new features?

Maintaining software like MagiC may be particularly difficult. Not only because the author says so, but also because software that works on a very low level, in the case of MagiC the operating system itself, is hard to debug. Additionally one must have access to all the officially supported hardware (ST, TT, Falcon, Milan) in order to ensure that new versions still run on all platforms. And one needs beta testers willing to risk losing their data if. Bugs in operating systems - and hard disk drivers - can cause serious problems."

Guillaume replies:

"I think that Didier can do it. In my opinion, you don't have to understand the whole program to add something. For example, I have disassembled the SUPERCHARGER software (driver for the DMA hard PC emulator), and I'm really not good at DMA transfers, etc... But I changed lots of things to adapt it to my NOVA card and to get the Hercules resolution. I changed what I understood..."

For this (the hard disk drivers), you're totally right, a beta OS can be dangerous! Well, this can be done by booting from a ZIP drive, or from a floppy and "hiding" the other partitions you want to preserve.

But MagiC looks to me as a very good program, easy to install and with good performances, it's a pity to let it behind with no improvements."

Well folks, that's it for this time around. Tune in again next week,

same time, same station, and be ready to listen to what they are saying when...

PEOPLE ARE TALKING

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->In This Week's Gaming Section - New, Cheaper PS3 Announced!  
    "Orange Box" A Great Value!  
    "3rd Space" Vest!  
    And more!
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->A-ONE's Game Console Industry News      -   The Latest Gaming News!
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Sony Announces New, Cheaper PS3

Sony Corp. on Thursday cut the price of its PlayStation 3 game console in the U.S. and announced an even cheaper model that will arrive before the holiday shopping season.

The top-line PlayStation model, with an 80 gigabyte hard drive, now costs \$499, down from \$599. That effectively eliminates the lower-end model, which has a 60-gigabyte drive and has sold for \$499.

A new low-end model with a 40-gigabyte drive will go on sale Nov. 2 for \$399.

Unlike the other PlayStation 3 models, the new one won't be able to play games made for the PlayStation 2. In a statement, Sony said this was due to a more extensive lineup of games of the PlayStation 3.

The U.S. launch of the 40-gigabyte model was widely expected, since Sony has already announced it for Japan and Europe. It narrows the price gap with competing game consoles, but the PlayStation is still the most expensive.

Microsoft Corp.'s Xbox 360 costs \$350 and Nintendo Corp.'s Wii costs \$250. The PlayStation 3 has been trailing them both in U.S. sales, and the Wii has been a breakout hit for Nintendo, with more than 9 million units shipped. Sony has sold 5 million PlayStation 3s since they went on sale in November last year.

'Orange Box' A Great Value

"The Orange Box" is one of the best values in video games since, well, ever.

There's no actual orange box with "Orange Box" (\$59.99 for Xbox 360, \$49.95 for Windows PCs, Rated T through M).

More on that later. But we do get just about everything a gamer could want:

- * A first-person shooter with a plot that doesn't pile on one cliché after another? The included "Half-Life 2" games deliver a breathtaking sci-fi experience that makes Master Chief's travails seem like a hack job.

- * Online multiplayer battles? Nine years in the making, "Team Fortress 2," brings with it a uniquely stylized, time-sucking remake of an online shoot-'em-up classic.

- * A bizarre puzzle game with enough twists and turns to confuse M.C. Escher? A few minutes with "Portal" makes me believe those string-theory physicists who say there are far more than just four dimensions.

So yeah, only three of the five games are new. To appreciate the new "Episode Two," you really need to complete the old "Half-Life 2" and "Episode One."

After three years, the groundbreaking game holds up well - and often exceeds - anything I've experienced in newer first-person shooters.

In "Episode Two," you guide crowbar-wielding scientist Gordon Freeman through a dystopian battle against invading aliens and sinister government forces. It sounds like typical sci-fi schlock, but there's such an amazing depth of character and bleakness of vision.

From the original "Half-Life 2" to the shocking conclusion of "Episode Two," the lengthy journey of Freeman and other key characters is one of the most cinematic, emotional stories I've experienced.

As infomercial king Ron Popeil might say, 'But wait, there's more!'

"Orange Box" also appeals to online action addicts with "Team Fortress 2."

This redo of the first definitive team-based first-person shooter in 1996 brings a unique art style that reminds me of the Wile E. Coyote and Road Runner animated shorts.

Cartoonish without being childlike, it's a nice contrast to every other game in the genre, which strive for photorealism.

"Team Fortress 2" splits a roster of different combatants, such as the fragile Medic for healing and the lumbering Heavy for mass destruction, into two teams, red and blue.

The goals vary from capturing the enemy's intelligence briefcase to controlling various territory points on a map. It's a refined experience that's filled with the unexpected highs (and lows) of fighting with and against other real people online.

Finally, there's "Portal." This is a game that defies description. In short, you play as a test subject in a mind-bending training course

sponsored by Aperture Science Laboratories. Using a device that can open portals through walls, ceilings and floors, you'll have to solve an increasingly strange series of puzzles to get from one end to the other.

"Orange Box" is available in the usual disc format for the Xbox 360. PC owners, however, can use Valve's Steam program for direct digital downloads. This method saves packaging and makes the PC version \$10 cheaper.

Individually, these games are phenomenal. By packing them together, Valve has given gamers of all stripes one of the best deals in video game history.

Four stars out of four.

Special Vest Lets Players Feel Video Game Blows

A US surgeon working on a "tele-health" breakthrough has devised a way for video game warriors to feel shots, stabs, slams, and hits dealt to their on-screen characters.

A vest designed by doctor Mark Ombrellaro uses air pressure and feedback from computer games to deliver pneumatic thumps to the spots on players' torsos where they would have been struck were they actually on the battlefields.

The "3rd Space" vest will make its US debut in November at a price of 189 dollars. It will be launched with the first-person shooter game "Call of Duty" and a custom-made title.

"It was originally designed as a medical device," Ombrellaro told AFP while letting gamers try the vest at the E for All video game exposition in Los Angeles.

"To give medical exams via the Internet to prisoners, the elderly, those in rural communities and other isolated people."

The medical version of the vest is more sophisticated, enabling doctors sitting at their computers to prod, poke and press patients' bodies from afar and get feedback on what they are virtually feeling, according to Ombrellaro.

That model is pending approval by the US Food and Drug Administration, which wants to be assured that diagnosis made using the vests are reliable.

"You can teleconference with patients but you are missing the hands-on," the vascular surgeon said. "Being able to do that is the last step to tele-health."

A 3rd Space vest that mimics the feeling of G-forces and turning pressures for flight and car games is to be launched early next year, after Ombrellaro's company TN Games finds exciting titles to match it with.

TN Games is based in technology giant Microsoft's home town of Redmond, Washington.

"We've had some Microsoft people check it out," Ombrellaro said.

UK Spy Agency Puts Out Call To Gamers

A British intelligence agency is seeking spies in cyberspace.

GCHQ, the surveillance arm of British intelligence, said Thursday it hopes to attract computer-savvy young recruits by embedding job ads within video games such as "Tom Clancy's Splinter Cell: Double Agent."

GCHQ, which stands for Government Communications Headquarters, said it was looking to reach "an Internet-savvy generation of graduate groups."

In a statement, GCHQ said it hoped the campaign would "capture the imagination of people with a particular interest in IT."

The monthlong ad campaign, which starts at the end of October, is being run by GCHQ, the recruitment firm TMP Worldwide and Microsoft-owned in-game ad agency Massive Inc.

Ads headed "Careers in British Intelligence" will appear as billboards in scenes in "Splinter Cell" and other games including "Need for Speed Carbon" and "Enemy Territory: Quake Wars" when they are played on computers and Microsoft Xbox consoles in Britain.

Kate Clemens, Head of GCHQ's digital strategy at TMP Worldwide, said the campaign would target frequent gamers who "are particularly receptive to innovative forms of advertising."

"The world of online gaming offers GCHQ a further route to target a captive audience," she said.

GCHQ employs about 5,000 people at its high-tech headquarters in Cheltenham, western England.

Britain's shadowy intelligence services have slowly been raising their profile - and deflating some cherished secret-agent myths - as they attempt to attract a larger and more diverse pool of recruits.

The foreign intelligence service MI6 launched a Web site in 2005, which cautions that its work is far from the "level of glamour and excitement" of James Bond films. Its domestic counterpart, MI5, has an online section tackling "myths and misconceptions" that stresses "we do not kill people or arrange their assassination."

MI5 has placed job ads on the side of double-decker London buses and tried to attract more female applicants with ads in women's changing rooms at gyms.

A British security official said the locker-room posters had brought a wave of applicants, doubling the number of women employed as surveillance officers.

"The idea is to make people think more broadly about MI5 as a potential employer," she said, demanding anonymity to discuss intelligence work. "We need all kinds of people, not just those who look like they've stepped out an army officer academy."

MI6 - long the preserve of white, male graduates of Oxford and Cambridge universities - now stresses it requires employees from a wide range of backgrounds and with a variety of skills. One recent newspaper ad appealed for administrators under the tag line: "Protect your country. At your desk."

Microsoft bought New York-based Massive last year. The company sells virtual billboard space to advertisers, then - rather than placing the ads within the games themselves - delivers them over the Internet to PCs and Xbox 360 game consoles.

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A-ONE's Headline News
The Latest in Computer Technology News
Compiled by: Dana P. Jacobson

House Votes To Renew Internet Tax Block

The House on Tuesday overwhelmingly approved a four-year extension of a moratorium on state and local taxes on Internet access, despite widespread support in both parties for a permanent ban.

The tax ban, first passed in 1998, is set to expire on Nov. 1. The extension exempts some states that approved taxes prior to the original enactment.

The vote was 405-2.

"This bill is pro consumer, pro innovation and pro technology," said Rep. Mel Watt, D-N.C., one of the bill's sponsors.

The bill to extend the tax break fell short of the permanent exemption that many lawmakers favor. A bill to make the moratorium permanent has 238 House co-sponsors, more than a majority.

Rep. Lamar Smith, R-Texas, said a permanent ban would ensure that businesses would continue to invest in the Internet and keep access affordable for users. He charged that by limiting the House to consideration of a temporary extension, Democratic leaders "want to leave the door open to taxing the Internet in the future."

Watt, however, argued that a temporary ban was the right way to go both for political and practical reasons.

The Senate, which must act next on the legislation, has "in many ways made it clear that a permanent moratorium would be dead on arrival," Watt said. Without quick action, the ban was in danger of expiring before new legislation could pass, he said.

Watt said the bill also will allow lawmakers to make changes as needed, as has occurred the two times the moratorium has been extended since 1998.

Action is uncertain in the Senate, where there is also considerable support for a permanent tax ban.

The bill is HR 3678.

Apple's Leopard System Goes On Sale

Apple Inc.'s next-generation operating system, Mac OS X "Leopard," will be available Oct. 26 for \$129, and Apple's online store is taking pre-orders, the company said Tuesday.

Leopard was originally due in June, but Apple said in April that it needed to divert resources so it could launch the much-anticipated iPhone on time. Such product delays are rare for the Cupertino-based company.

Leopard, which the company says will offer more than 300 new features, is the sixth major upgrade Apple has made to Mac OS X since the desktop operating system debuted in 2001.

One of the new features is "Boot Camp," which lets users install Microsoft Corp.'s Windows on Intel-based Macs, though both operating systems can't run at the same time. The feature, in a test version released last year, already has helped attract new customers to the Macintosh platform.

Mac revenues have hit record highs for the past year, and Apple's share of the PC market has grown. Analysts expect Apple's strategy of introducing products that work with Microsoft's Windows software to further boost computer sales.

Market researcher Gartner Inc. said Apple surpassed Gateway in the second quarter to become the third-largest computer vendor in the U.S. with a 6.4 percent slice of the market, up from 5 percent in the same year period a year ago.

Apple senior vice president of worldwide marketing Phil Schiller said he expects existing Apple users will move quickly to adopt Leopard - in contrast to Microsoft's experience with its latest operating system overhaul.

When Microsoft launched Vista, its first major upgrade to Windows in five years, in February, compatibility issues led some customers and computer makers to return to the older Windows XP. Industry analysts say Vista has not significantly fueled PC sales.

Gartner analyst Michael Silver views the new features on Leopard as "incremental improvements," but gives Apple credit for making the upgrade process easy and making the changes visible.

"Time Machine," for instance, is an automated backup system in Leopard that enables users to flip through old versions of a file in a 3D layout similar to the "Cover Flow" interface on Apple's iTunes music software.

"Vista has interesting backup features," Silver said. "But who knows about it? It's hidden. Apple is using this 3D interface to exploit it."

Consumers and schools remain Apple's main market focus, but businesses

aren't being ignored: a version of Leopard for servers will launch at the same time as the consumer version, Apple said.

Internet Preparing To Go Into Outer Space

After expanding across Earth, the Internet is now set to spread into outer space to reach parts no network has gone before, one of its co-creators predicted Wednesday.

Vinton Cerf said the proposed "interplanetary" Internet would allow people an ability "to access information and to control experiments taking place far away" from Earth.

Expanding into the solar system would bring new rules and regulations too, he told an annual Seoul forum, saying he and other experts were working on a set of standards designed to guide space-era Internet communications.

"Finally, the Internet can take us where no network has gone before," said Cerf, who is Google's vice president and chief internet evangelist,

He said he and a team of engineers at the California-based Jet Propulsion Laboratory would complete a key part of the project - establishing standards for space communications like those for Internet - in three years.

Cerf told a separate news conference that new standards were needed because of the huge distances and time delays involved in communication across space.

He went on: "This effort is now bearing fruit and is on track to be space qualified and standardized in the 2010 time frame.

"Eventually we will accumulate an interplanetary backbone to assist robotic and manned missions with robust communication."

Cerf, seen as a founding father of the Internet with Robert Kahn, marveled at its explosive growth in the last decade, saying it was a trend that would continue.

The number of Internet users has grown 20-fold in the past decade to about 1.2 billion people this year, with the number of computer servers rising from 22.5 million to 489 million, he said.

"Eventually," he added, "the entire world will have access to the services that are available on the Internet."

One of the outstanding changes was the Internet's huge growth in Asia which now boasts 436 million users, well above the figures of 321 million in Europe and 233 million in North America, the birthplace of the web, he said.

"That there are so many users in Asia suggests the content of the Internet will eventually contain far more information in languages other than English than it does today," he added.

Technological changes were occurring to keep pace with the expansion, with

one of the key challenges being a shortage of Internet addresses.

The Internet currently allows only 4.3 billion unique addresses - plenty back in the 1970s but not enough, said Cerf, who also chairs the board of the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN).

He said ICANN, which manages domain names and addresses, was preparing to launch a new format accommodating 340 trillion trillion trillion addresses.

Cerf said ICANN would meet later this month to discuss expanding the number of characters used for internationalised domain names (IDNs) such as .com or .net, which now only adopt Latin and Roman ones.

"Sometime in the first half of 2008, I expect, there will be opportunities to register IDNs using different languages other than Latin," he said.

He said he expects "billions of Internet-enabled devices" to emerge, with items to cover nearly all home appliances such as televisions, radios, kitchen equipment, fax machines and printers, refrigerators and bathroom scales.

Comcast Blocks Some Internet Traffic

Comcast Corp. actively interferes with attempts by some of its high-speed Internet subscribers to share files online, a move that runs counter to the tradition of treating all types of Net traffic equally.

The interference, which The Associated Press confirmed through nationwide tests, is the most drastic example yet of data discrimination by a U.S. Internet service provider. It involves company computers masquerading as those of its users.

If widely applied by other ISPs, the technology Comcast is using would be a crippling blow to the BitTorrent, eDonkey and Gnutella file-sharing networks. While these are mainly known as sources of copyright music, software and movies, BitTorrent in particular is emerging as a legitimate tool for quickly disseminating legal content.

The principle of equal treatment of traffic, called "Net Neutrality" by proponents, is not enshrined in law but supported by some regulations. Most of the debate around the issue has centered on tentative plans, now postponed, by large Internet carriers to offer preferential treatment of traffic from certain content providers for a fee.

Comcast's interference, on the other hand, appears to be an aggressive way of managing its network to keep file-sharing traffic from swallowing too much bandwidth and affecting the Internet speeds of other subscribers.

Comcast, the nation's largest cable TV operator and No. 2 Internet provider, would not specifically address the practice, but spokesman Charlie Douglas confirmed that it uses sophisticated methods to keep Net connections running smoothly.

"Comcast does not block access to any applications, including BitTorrent," he said.

Douglas would not specify what the company means by "access" - Comcast subscribers can download BitTorrent files without hindrance. Only uploads of complete files are blocked or delayed by the company, as indicated by AP tests.

But with "peer-to-peer" technology, users exchange files with each other, and one person's upload is another's download. That means Comcast's blocking of certain uploads has repercussions in the global network of file sharers.

Comcast's technology kicks in, though not consistently, when one BitTorrent user attempts to share a complete file with another user.

Each PC gets a message invisible to the user that looks like it comes from the other computer, telling it to stop communicating. But neither message originated from the other computer - it comes from Comcast. If it were a telephone conversation, it would be like the operator breaking into the conversation, telling each talker in the voice of the other: "Sorry, I have to hang up. Good bye."

Matthew Elvey, a Comcast subscriber in the San Francisco area who has noticed BitTorrent uploads being stifled, acknowledged that the company has the right to manage its network, but disapproves of the method, saying it appears to be deceptive.

"There's the wrong way of going about that and the right way," said Elvey, who is a computer consultant.

Comcast's interference affects all types of content, meaning that, for instance, an independent movie producer who wanted to distribute his work using BitTorrent and his Comcast connection could find that difficult or impossible - as would someone pirating music.

Internet service providers have long complained about the vast amounts of traffic generated by a small number of subscribers who are avid users of file-sharing programs. Peer-to-peer applications account for between 50 percent and 90 percent of overall Internet traffic, according to a survey this year by ipoque GmbH, a German vendor of traffic-management equipment.

"We have a responsibility to manage our network to ensure all our customers have the best broadband experience possible," Douglas said. "This means we use the latest technologies to manage our network to provide a quality experience for all Comcast subscribers."

The practice of managing the flow of Internet data is known as "traffic shaping," and is already widespread among Internet service providers. It usually involves slowing down some forms of traffic, like file-sharing, while giving others priority. Other ISPs have attempted to block some file-sharing application by so-called "port filtering," but that method is easily circumvented and now largely ineffective.

Comcast's approach to traffic shaping is different because of the drastic effect it has on one type of traffic - in some cases blocking it rather than slowing it down - and the method used, which is difficult to circumvent and involves the company falsifying network traffic.

The "Net Neutrality" debate erupted in 2005, when AT&T Inc. suggested it would like to charge some Web companies more for preferential treatment

of their traffic. Consumer advocates and Web heavyweights like Google Inc. and Amazon Inc. cried foul, saying it's a bedrock principle of the Internet that all traffic be treated equally.

To get its acquisition of BellSouth Corp. approved by the Federal Communications Commission, AT&T agreed in late 2006 not to implement such plans or prioritize traffic based on its origin for two and a half years. However, it did not make any commitments not to prioritize traffic based on its type, which is what Comcast is doing.

The FCC's stance on traffic shaping is not clear. A 2005 policy statement says that "consumers are entitled to run applications and services of their choice," but that principle is "subject to reasonable network management." Spokeswoman Mary Diamond would not elaborate.

Free Press, a Washington-based public interest group that advocates Net Neutrality, opposes the kind of filtering applied by Comcast.

"We don't believe that any Internet provider should be able to discriminate, block or impair their consumers' ability to send or receive legal content over the Internet," said Free Press spokeswoman Jen Howard.

Paul "Tony" Watson, a network security engineer at Google Inc. who has previously studied ways hackers could disrupt Internet traffic in a manner similar to the method Comcast is using, said the cable company was probably acting within its legal rights.

"It's their network and they can do what they want," said Watson. "My concern is the precedent. In the past, when people got an ISP connection, they were getting a connection to the Internet. The only determination was price and bandwidth. Now they're going to have to make much more complicated decisions such as price, bandwidth, and what services I can get over the Internet."

Several companies have sprung up that rely on peer-to-peer technology, including BitTorrent Inc., founded by the creator of the BitTorrent software (which exists in several versions freely distributed by different groups and companies).

Ashwin Navin, the company's president and co-founder, confirmed that it has noticed interference from Comcast, in addition to some Canadian Internet service providers.

"They're using sophisticated technology to degrade service, which probably costs them a lot of money. It would be better to see them use that money to improve service," Navin said, noting that BitTorrent and other peer-to-peer applications are a major reason consumers sign up for broadband.

BitTorrent Inc. announced Oct. 9 that it was teaming up with online video companies to use its technology to distribute legal content.

Other companies that rely on peer-to-peer technology, and could be affected if Comcast decides to expand the range of applications it filters, include Internet TV service Joost, eBay Inc.'s Skype video-conferencing program and movie download appliance Vudu. There is no sign that Comcast is hampering those services.

Comcast subscriber Robb Topolski, a former software quality engineer at Intel Corp., started noticing the interference when trying to upload with

file-sharing programs Gnutella and eDonkey early this year.

In August, Topolski began to see reports on Internet forum DSLreports.com from other Comcast users with the same problem. He now believes that his home town of Hillsboro, Ore., was a test market for the technology that was later widely applied in other Comcast service areas.

Topolski agrees that Comcast has a right to manage its network and slow down traffic that affects other subscribers, but disapproves of their method.

"By Comcast not acknowledging that they do this at all, there's no way to report any problems with it," Topolski said.

4 More States Seek Microsoft Oversight

Four states concerned about Microsoft Corp.'s market power are pressing a federal court to extend by five years oversight of the software company that began in 2002 as part of a landmark antitrust settlement.

The request, filed late Thursday, represents a reversal for New York, Maryland, Louisiana and Florida. In August, the group submitted court papers, along with the Justice Department, that said the consent decree had achieved its goal of safeguarding competition in certain software markets.

In their newest filing, however, the states said that while "competitive developments in the industry today are encouraging, whether they have enough traction to enhance long-term competition" in the market for computer operating systems "is uncertain."

Jeffrey Lerner, communications director for the New York Attorney General's office, said the success of the decree thus far is the rationale for extending it. "We believe that the court's order has helped marketplace participants compete, and contributed to the product choices that are available to consumers and business using personal computers," Lerner said in an e-mailed statement.

The four states joined a separate group of six states - led by California - and the District of Columbia, arguing last month during a court hearing that it would ask for a five year-extension of the settlement, to 2012. The decree is set to expire Nov. 12.

The so-called California group of states submitted its request in writing late Oct. 16.

Microsoft spokesman Jack Evans said there is no need for further oversight of the company's business. "The consent decree has served its purpose," he said.

The antitrust settlement - reached between Microsoft, the federal government and 17 states - barred the software giant from certain anticompetitive behaviors, such as seeking deals with computer makers to exclude competing software, and sought to ensure that Microsoft couldn't use its operating system monopoly to stifle competition in other products.

Efforts to extend the decree may face an uphill battle. U.S. District Court Judge Colleen Kollar-Kotelly said during a hearing Sept. 11 that she would consider the California group's request, but added that any extension would need to be for an "identifiable purpose."

Currently, Microsoft is on track to be in compliance with the antitrust settlement when it expires, Kollar-Kotelly said.

Evans said Microsoft intends to file a response to the states' request by the end of October. A status hearing on the antitrust decree is scheduled for Nov. 6.

Five Years in Jail for Porn Spammers

Two men were sentenced to prison Friday in the first successful criminal prosecution under the CAN-SPAM Act. James R. Schaffer, 41, of Paradise Valley, Arizona, and Jeffrey A. Kilbride, 41, of Venice, California, were convicted in June of fraud, conspiracy, money laundering, and obscenity. Last week, the judge in the case sentenced Schaffer to 63 months and Kilbride to 72 months in federal prison.

The two were ordered to disgorge more than \$1.1 million in illegal proceeds obtained through their porn-spamming operation. They also had to pay a \$100,000 fine and reimburse AOL \$77,500. The judge gave Kilbride a higher sentence because it was discovered that he attempted to stop a government witness from testifying.

CAN-SPAM, or Controlling the Assault of Non-Solicited Pornography and Marketing, bans false headers and misleading subject lines, and requires commercial solicitations be properly identified.

According to the Justice Department, beginning in 2003, Kilbride and Schaffer sent out millions of spam messages advertising hard-core porn sites. They made their million dollars by earning a commission for every person who subscribed to a site after receiving one of their spams.

After the CAN-SPAM Act was passed - it became effective January 1, 2004 - the two started running their operation through servers in Amsterdam, falsifying the headers so the messages appeared to come from overseas, although the operation was being run from Phoenix.

At the trial in federal court in Arizona, prosecutors brought in witnesses from around the country to testify about the impact on families and children who received the hard-core spam. AOL and the Federal Trade Commission received 1.5 million complaints about the spams.

Evidence introduced at trial showed that the pair created a fictitious employee at a shell company in Mauritius. By falsifying headers and domain information, they made it appear as if the employee was sending the e-mails from overseas. They also laundered money through bank accounts in Mauritius and the Isle of Man.

While the Justice Department applauds its success in this case, is the fact that CAN-SPAM is just now yielding jail terms - after almost four years on the books - a sign that the law is ineffective? Not necessarily, Andrew Storms, director of security operations at nCircle, said in an e-mail.

"Criminal trials that include technical computer details are difficult to bring before a jury trial," he noted. "Even with judge's instructions, juries often find it difficult to understand the technical nature of what's at hand."

Consider, for instance, the case of Julie Amero, a school teacher whose computer was infected with porn malware. A pornographic ad popped up when she was in the middle of a presentation to young children. She was tried and convicted in January on four counts of risk of injury to a minor, charges that carried a maximum jail sentence of 40 years. In June, her conviction was thrown out but she might yet be facing a second trial. "Those who work in the computer industry found the case to be wrought with misunderstandings and misrepresentations," Storms said.

While the spam conviction is a "proud and successful case for the Justice Department," the case serves to illustrate the limits of criminal prosecution on the spam problem. "It is well known that the majority of spam today is sent by zombie computer networks throughout the world," he said. "Further, those who control and manage the zombies have been linked to offshore mafia-style rings."

Spammers' New MP3 Trick May Be Short-Lived

A variation of spam is sliding past spam filters into inboxes, but it's not likely the new trick will be successful much longer, a security expert said Thursday.

The spam messages, urging recipients to buy a stock, have an MP3 audio attachment but no subject line or text, said John Graham-Cumming, an anti-spam consultant and researcher who is based in France.

"I think this is the first time we've seen this," said Graham-Cumming, who tracks new kinds of spam.

The audio messages, which vary in length, contain a warbled, robotic voice with a British accent encouraging people to invest in Exit Only, a company that owns a Web site, www.Text4Cars.com, which connects vehicle buyers and sells through SMS (Short Message Service). Exit Only says it's not involved in sending the spam.

Graham-Cumming said the spam falls into the category of "pump and dump" fraud. Scammers invest in a company with a low-priced stock and send out a round of spam, causing gullible investors to buy it and increase the stock's price.

As the stock price peaks, fraudsters cash out, which causes the stock to precipitously fall, burning other investors. The practice is illegal.

Exit Only was trading around \$0.41 on Thursday. Not much detail is available on the company, but it issued a news release on Tuesday heralding the launch of its Text4Cars service in the Los Angeles area. The news release said the company hoped to be fully launched in the United States in early 2008.

Exit Only's CEO, David Dion, said he learned of the spam around Wednesday morning. He has since notified the U.S. Securities and Exchange

Commission and said his company has nothing to do with the spam run.

"I am very distraught by this," Dion said.

Dion said only about 100 shares have been traded so far, so the scam hasn't been successful.

The messages are more annoying than harmful. But there are a variety of defenses e-mail administrators and security companies can employ to stop it, Graham-Cumming said.

Spam filters can be configured to cull messages with MP3s, since most companies don't have a business use for the file type, Graham-Cumming said. Administrators can also change their e-mail server settings to slow down the speed at which they receive messages with MP3 attachments, he said.

That method has been proven to frustrate spammers, who typically shut down the connection if the spam isn't going through quickly enough since the delay consumes valuable bandwidth, Graham-Cumming said.

These spam messages are also relatively large - around 100KB - compared to other spam, which may be another reason this kind of spam may not be around for long. Spam messages with larger file sizes require more bandwidth to send, meaning spammers can't send out high volumes of messages, Graham-Cumming said.

"Honestly, my prediction is this is going to be around for a while and disappear," he said.

E-mail security company MessageLabs said it was catching about 10,000 spam messages with MP3s per hour since late Wednesday night.

Computers Top Holiday Wish Lists

Move over, peace and happiness. Computers are what Americans really want nowadays.

The machines that feed us infinite and instant information, store our digital memories, give us hours of fun with games, videos or music - and help us do our taxes - outrank peace, happiness and clothes this year as the most wished-for gifts, according to an annual U.S. survey by the consumer electronics industry's largest trade organization.

Last year, the most popular answer to the survey's open-ended query about respondents' holiday wishes was clothing, followed by peace and happiness, money and then computers.

This year, after computers, peace and happiness came in second, followed by a big-screen TV, clothes and then money.

Such enthusiasm for computers, TVs, as well as other electronics will help drive electronics sales up 7 percent to \$48.1 billion in the fourth quarter from \$44.8 billion the year-ago period, according to a forecast by the Consumer Electronics Association.

By comparison, the overall retail industry is expected to see holiday

sales grow 4 percent, according to the National Retail Federation.

"We're looking at a very solid season for consumer electronics, and it's certainly a bright spot for the economy," said Joe Bates, CEA's director of research.

For all of 2007, electronics sales are expected to reach \$160 billion, up 8 percent from \$148 billion last year, according to the CEA forecast.

The organization's annual consumer survey separately evaluated shopping intentions for the holidays. The random telephone survey of 1,003 U.S. adults was conducted in late September and had a margin of error of 3.1 percentage points.

"The fact that they want computers over clothing and peace and happiness is amazing," said Shawn DuBravac, the CEA's economist. "It's a testament to what the tech industry has done to empower the consumer."

People are doing more with their computers, such as posting videos or writing blogs, Bates said. The demand for laptops is particularly strong, "and you can buy a more powerful one and at a lower price than what you paid for four years ago," he said.

The survey also indicated consumers plan to spend bit more on gadget gifts this year: \$358 per household versus \$337 in 2006.

Gifts will account for about 46 percent of electronics sales in the fourth quarter, while the rest will come from purchases people make for themselves - a typical shopping pattern during the holiday period, Bates said.

As for specific gizmos people wanted to receive as gifts this holiday season, portable music players topped the list for the third year in a row. Laptops rose to second place from third and video game systems displaced digital cameras to come in third.

Gaming will be hotter this year, Bates said, since all the next-generation consoles have been out for at least a year and have a larger library of games.

A video game system was also the most popular item people planned to give as an electronics gift this year, according to the survey.

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